

'YOU TALKING TO ME?'

Conversations on Art and Aesthetics

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In May 2017, my book 'Conversations on Art and Aesthetics' appeared. It contains conversations with, and photographic portraits of, ten prominent philosophers of art. They are Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie, Arthur Danto, Cynthia Freeland, Paul Guyer, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Jerrold Levinson, Jenefer Robinson, Roger Scruton, and Kendall Walton. The book has two main aims. One is to provide a broad and accessible overview of what aesthetics as a subfield of philosophy has to offer. The other is to stimulate new work in this area of research. In this brief paper I'd like to say a bit more about this second objective. Current research is rarely conducted or communicated in the form of conversations, so the question arises: how can a book like mine fit with and feed into a research culture which is very much dominated by the format of the journal article?

The first thing to note is that, despite the obvious differences in presentation, there are also strong similarities between the discussions that take place in philosophy journals and the discussions laid down in my book. The same basic sequence—X defends a claim, Y formulates objections, X responds to objections—is really at the heart of both. Moreover, it's not too much of a stretch to see the debates that take place in philosophy journals as ongoing conversations between scholars. Looked at it this way, it is not the incongruity but precisely the continuity between the two formats that appears striking. In addition, the conversational format has

some distinct advantages over the more familiar format of the journal article. I'd like to highlight six ways in particular in which this collection could prove a unique and useful resource for further research.

First, in today's academic culture where scholars are prompted to publish separate essays, rather than present grand philosophical systems, it is easy to lose sight of the underlying ideas and overarching themes that hold their work together. The conversation format has made it possible for me to ask authors directly about the overall coherence of their work. And some of the answers I received were surprising. Levinson, for instance, begins by saying that contextualism—the idea that the context of creation is crucial in determining the identity, art status, and meaning of a work of art—is the central thread running through his work. But when I ask him what distinguishes his views from other contextualist views, he mentions how he tends to foreground experience and value more than other analytic aestheticians—a response I had not anticipated given that Levinson is probably best known for essays that barely touch upon issues relating to experience and value (such as 'What a Musical Work Is'¹ and 'Defining Art Historically'²). Another interesting contrast comes up in my conversation with Guyer, who has devoted much of his career to the study of one of the most systematic thinkers in history, Immanuel Kant, but who reveals that he has not attempted to make a systematic contribution to contemporary aesthetics himself and that he is in fact a strong supporter of non-reductionist, pluralistic theories of aesthetic value. When I met up with Carroll and Danto, I put the question to them in

¹ Levinson 1980.

² Levinson 1979.

terms borrowed from Isaiah Berlin's famous essay 'The Hedgehog and the Fox'³, which divides thinkers into two categories. Hedgehogs relate everything to a single, universal principle, whereas foxes rely on multiple experiences and entertain a vast variety of ideas without seeking to fit them all into, or exclude them from, any one grand system. But while one might expect Danto to own up to being a hedgehog and Carroll to being a fox, they both resist this easy categorisation and go on to explain why their work cannot be pigeon-holed in any straightforward way.

Incidentally, the more holistic approach of these conversations not only allowed me to probe the overall coherence of an author's work, but also to bring to light certain tensions or inconsistencies in their thinking. This is nowhere more evident than in my conversation with Danto. For example, while Danto is adamant that beauty is as obvious as blue and that we spot it immediately when it is present in a work, he also recounts in some detail how he came to appreciate the beauty of Bernini's 'Santa Teresa' only very gradually. Or consider the idea that art does not always have to be beautiful. On the one hand, Danto calls this one of the great conceptual clarifications of the twentieth century. On the other hand, he also acknowledges that a lot of medieval art is not, and was not meant to be beautiful. From a methodological perspective, readers may find it amusing to see how, after faulting Wollheim for refusing to go along with an argument from indiscernibles, Danto himself manifests a similar reluctance when I invite him to think about a painting that would be indiscernible from Motherwell's 'Elegy to the Spanish Republic'.

Second, all of my conversation partners have left their mark

³ Berlin 1953.

on philosophy of art and aesthetics, but some of them have also done significant work in other areas of philosophy (or outside of philosophy). This work is not always acknowledged in the professional journals of our discipline. So I have taken the opportunity in this book to ask them about some of their other writings. Scruton, for example, is a notable conservative philosopher and talking to him about the possible connections between his social and political reflections and his academic work in aesthetics was quite instructive. In my encounter with Carroll we briefly discussed his experience as a critic and screenwriter as well as his book on Buster Keaton.⁴ And I begin my conversation with Levinson with some reflections on his not-too-well-known essay on sexual perversion.⁵

Third, in research articles there is seldom room to elaborate on the provenance of one's theories, even though knowledge of the early influences on an author is often helpful in understanding the views they ultimately arrive at. So, I hope the reader will find it as illuminating as I did to hear how, say, Currie was influenced by Imre Lakatos, David Lewis, David Armstrong and later on by Walton and Levinson. Or how Stanley Cavell's teaching and thinking had a lasting impact on Guyer. The book may throw up some further surprises in this respect: Robinson, who is perhaps the most scientifically oriented of all the philosophers I spoke with, acknowledges her debt to F.R. Leavis, the literary scholar who was notoriously dismissive of science in the so-called 'two cultures' debate. Carroll, who has been a vocal critic of some French philosophy in the past, talks about the influence that the French phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty had on

⁴ Carroll 2007.

⁵ Levinson 2003.

him when he was writing his Ph.D. And although twentieth century philosopher Nelson Goodman is no longer the central figure in aesthetics he once was, it is intriguing to see how his name still pops up in half of the conversations in this volume. Equally intriguing, I should say, are the passages where authors reveal how some of their ideas were not so much influenced but definitely anticipated by others. For instance, it turns out that one of Guyer's key insights about the relation between analysis and psychology in aesthetic theory can also be found in the work of a now largely forgotten female philosopher, Ethel Puffer. Walton, on his part, even admits to being beaten to the punch by a fictional character.

Fourth, what authors do *not* write about can potentially be as revealing as what they do end up writing about. Hence in some of my conversations I have tried to address what might be considered blind spots in the author's oeuvre. With Korsmeyer that meant talking about the definition of art; with Danto and Levinson it meant talking about the aesthetics of nature; and with Walton I spoke about architecture and dance. Furthermore, the conversational format gave me a chance to query not just individual omissions, but also lacunae in the discipline as a whole. For instance, if you look at the leading aesthetics journals you will find many essays on beauty in art and nature, but very few that deal with the beauty of human beings (notwithstanding the fact that outside of academia the term 'aesthetics' is most commonly used to refer to cosmetics, beauty treatments, and bodybuilding). Why is that? Or why has so much been written about particular art forms, especially music, and virtually nothing about other art forms such as sculpture? And what about philosophical texts or philosophers of the past who have fallen into obscurity? As I put the question to Guyer, might there be any hidden gems out there just waiting to be rediscovered?

Fifth, collecting the answers of ten leading philosophers in one volume allows one to develop the sort of overview that can be hard to maintain given the constant stream of research articles. And that in turn can bring to light various unsuspected contrasts and convergences between these philosophers. Danto and Scruton, for example, could not be further apart in their appreciation of contemporary art (one considers Warhol's Brillo Boxes a work of genius, the other dismisses it as a corny joke). But it turns out they do share a strong scepticism regarding the academic professionalisation of philosophy and the relevance of science for aesthetics. Conversely, Robinson and Currie are both eager to forge closer links between scientific and philosophical investigations, but they are increasingly at odds, so it transpires, about the cognitive value of art and literature.

Where possible I have asked authors to comment directly on some of the disagreements that emerged. So, I asked Scruton what he thinks about Danto's idea that Warhol's Brillo Boxes are the culmination of the history of art and I asked Robinson what she thinks about Currie's reasons for doubting that we learn anything significant from the novels she so admires. I also asked Robinson to comment on her disagreement with Korsmeyer regarding the notion of aesthetic disgust and her differences with Levinson regarding musical expressiveness.

In gaining a sense of where these prominent figures stand on important issues, one also gets a better idea of the direction in which the discipline is headed. Take the question that is often assumed to be at the very heart of what analytic philosophy of art is about: the question of the definition of art. In reading these conversations it becomes abundantly clear that the question has lost much of its urgency and importance in recent years. Many of the philosophers I

spoke with simply declare to have no interest in the topic and even those who have written extensively about it in the past, like Levinson and Danto, exhibit an unmistakable weariness when the subject is broached. Questions around aesthetic and artistic value, by contrast, have become much more central now. And readers of this book will be able to track exactly how the battle lines are drawn in discussions about value (with pluralists, such as Carroll and Guyer, pitted against monistic theories of different stripes, including cognitivism, championed by Robinson and Freeland, and aestheticism, championed by Scruton).

This brings us to the sixth and last advantage, namely that these conversations present an excellent occasion to reflect on the discipline of aesthetics itself—something for which the main research journals do not always allow space. What are the future challenges and opportunities for the discipline? Is there genuine progress in philosophy in general and in aesthetics in particular? (Most of my conversation partners believe that there is, though Korsmeyer and Freeland offer some caveats.) Does one need to study the history of aesthetics if one wants to do research in this area? Where do the analytic and continental approaches differ most and is there a possibility of mutual enrichment? (Almost everyone thinks the latter is the case, though there is also the acknowledgement that the divide may have widened in recent years.) How important is style in philosophy and does writing about aesthetics itself need to be aesthetically rewarding? Can aesthetics be relevant for art practice? (Carroll and Danto believe so, but Levinson and Guyer are not so sure.) How, if at all, can aesthetics benefit from current scientific research? How promising are emerging subdisciplines such as experimental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics?

The answers to these questions, and to the other questions I raise, will help to paint a picture of the state of aesthetics today. And that picture, I would like to add in conclusion, is not at all a grim one. In fact, the opposite is true. The field is thriving and expanding, constantly producing new theories and charting unexplored territory: from the culinary arts to video games, from musical chills to 3D cinema, from experimental aesthetics to aesthetic disgust. On the one hand, as you would expect from a flourishing field of study, research is becoming more and more specialised with increasingly sophisticated answers to the most fundamental questions as well as a growing body of work focusing on more and more specific topics. On the other hand, as I hope will be evident from this forthcoming collection, all this research activity has not made aesthetics into an esoteric or exclusive field of study, accessible only to a small elite of experts and isolated from other disciplines or from everyday concerns. To the contrary: aesthetics was and is a perfect 'hub field', as one of my conversation partners rightly pointed out. That is to say, it's a central area from which you can do almost any kind of research in philosophy and which maintains close ties with cognate disciplines such as musicology, film theory, art history, psychology, and narratology. Moreover, since any credible philosophy of art and aesthetics must take its cues from our everyday engagement with aesthetic phenomena and works of art, esoteric tendencies have little chance to develop.

So, if 'Conversations on Art and Aesthetics' can help to make our prospering and accessible branch of philosophy even more appealing to a wider audience, whilst also making a modest contribution to its research culture, I shall consider my time well spent.

Postscript: There is one more advantage to this sort of project that I should mention: as early career philosophers know all too well, writing a philosophy dissertation or paper can sometimes be a lonely affair. The inner dialogue that we constantly engage in when we

consider potential objections and try to think of smart replies sometimes reminds me of the troubled and isolated Travis Bickle character in 'Taxi Driver' ("You talking to me? Well, I'm the only one here") From that perspective, too, having more conversations with actual people might not be a bad thing.

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